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Officials tracing taint's origin

PERCHLORATE: Sand and gravel washing could be spreading the explosive salt in water, some say.

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THE PRESS-ENTERPRISE

A gravel washing operation at a San Bernardino County landfill in Rialto could have spread a toxic component of rocket fuel that has so far contaminated 17 drinking-water wells, say state water-quality officials.

Concerns about the gravel washing were raised Thursday in a letter to the county from the Santa Ana Regional Water Quality Control Board. The letter ordered the county to step up its investigation of perchlorate pollution in groundwater in and near the Mid Valley landfill.

The county expanded the landfill by 266 acres in 1998 and dirt from the excavation has been washed on site to separate sand and gravel for the making of concrete.

"They have a pond of water, and that water is moving through soil that may have perchlorate in it," said Kurt Berchold, assistant executive officer for the Santa Ana Regional Water Quality Control Board.

The letter added, "Gravel washing operations on county property may have contributed to the mobilization or spread of perchlorate."

A county official said Thursday that Robertson's Ready Mix, which operates the gravel washing, agreed last week to stop the washing there.

"They indicated they would stop the washing and drain the pond," said John Goss, an assistant county administrator.

Officials with Robertson's referred questions to Rich Robertson, who could not be reached.

Perchlorate has formed a plume about 7 miles wide in the Rialto, Fontana, and Colton areas, contaminating at least 17 drinking-water wells. The explosive salt is believed to have come from weapons and fireworks that were made or stored in the area starting during World War II.

The county is just one of more than 40 companies and agencies in the area that are expected to

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be ordered to investigate the perchlorate contamination.

State water officials are concerned about the Mid-Valley landfill because its expansion took place on land that housed concrete bunkers used to store ammunition during World War II and fireworks after the war.

Earlier this month, the state Department of Toxic Substances Control issued a clean-up order, saying the bunker area was never properly cleaned up before it became part of the landfill.

High levels of perchlorate also have been found in wells down water from the landfill. Perchlorate was found in these wells before the gravel washing started, but in much lower concen-

trations, according to county records subpoenaed by the state water board.

Goss said that the pollution could be coming from a site not owned by the county.

Under an agreement with Robertson's, the county earns a 30 cent commission per ton of gravel and sand — known as aggregate — taken from the landfill. The deal has led to \$1 million per year for the county, said Don Casalman, finance manager for the county's Solid Waste Management Division.

The county gets about \$750,000 per year from sand and gravel excavated and washed on the site. The county also gets \$250,000 worth of free sand and gravel from Robertson's, Casalman said.

Staff writer Sharon McNary contributed to this report.

